THE

Sceptical Muſe:

OR, A

PARADOX

ON

Humane Underſtanding.

A

POEM.

Veri nihil: Omnia ficta Lucil.

Heu! quam præcipiti merſa profundo
Mens hebet! Boet. de Conſol. Philoſoph.

LONDON:

Printed for *R. Baſſet* at the *Goerge* in *Fleetſtreet*, and Sold by *Fr. Hicks* Bookſeller in *Cambridge*, 1699.

Harvard College Library
Sept. 30, 1911.
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TO make a World, and ſtretch the bulky Frame
Beyond where Thought or Fancy ever came:
The great Creators *Fiat* did ſuffice;
Mov'd by one Word the Maſſy Sphere did riſe.
But when he did the World's great Lord Create,
The Sacred *Triad* then in Council ſate.
Let us make Man, ſaid God, whom we'll allow
To rule the Globe, and be Vice-God below.
Let us Create him too like us Divine:
And on his Soul let our bright Image ſhine.
So ſpake th' *Eternal*, and was heard around:
Lowd Peals of Thunder did attend the ſound;
Nature obey'd, and lo! The teeming Earth
Produc'd a Figure of Ignoble Birth;
Of ſmall account, 'till the Celeſtial Soul
Inform'd the Clay, and ſo compos'd the whole.

As first the *Primogenial* Light was hurl'd,
And scatter'd through the yet unfinish'd World;
Till God proceeding on his work did place
The Lucid Atoms in one shining Mass;
So those perfections which divided shone
In Nature's works did yet unite in none;
Till Man appear'd, a Creature more compleat:
Where all those lively scatter'd graces met.

This glorious Being thus Divinely made
Exerts its pow'rs, and wonders are display'd:
The Soul which was of purest Angel-kind,
The reflex Image of its Maker's Mind:
At first unspotted by Polluting Sin,
With vigour did the Race of Life begin;
With all its Pow'rs and Faculties compleat
Started with Joy, and no resistance met,
Then th' *Understanding* without pain did climb:
Capacious, Active, Lively, and Sublime,
Clear as fair Fountains, and as pure as they,
Chast as the Morn, and open as the day.
The *Will*, which always follow'd Nature's Voice,
Was ne'er deceiv'd, but made a happy choice;
Judgment was then convictive, and sincere;
And all *Discourse* as Intuition clear.
Then Truth, or God himself, whom Truth we name
(For God and Truth are without doubt the same)
Was always present, and uncourted came;

That Immenſe Ocean which with Beauty flows;
That utmoſt *Thule* of Extended Vows
The Soul poſſeſs'd, nor from the Object mov'd:
But gaz'd, admir'd, contemplated, and lov'd.
Love then, that ſwe[illegible] proceſſion of the Mind,
Was from all Droſs, and Earthly Dreggs refin'd:
Wing'd with pure Zeal above the Clouds it rode,
And without *Plato's* Scale arriv'd at God.

To what perfection muſt that Schollar reach
Whom God's Immediate Diſcipline did teach?
Man at the firſt in perfect ſtate appears;
Mature in Knowledge and mature in Years.
From him We firſt Philoſophy may trace:
Parent of Wiſdom, as of Human Race.
O the Vaſt Riches of this New-born Mind!
To furniſh this, Heav'n prov'd exceſſive kind
Laviſh'd its Treaſures, and left none behind.
Since then, no Soul ſo brightly clad appears:
Such Seraph's Robes, nor Heav'nly Garments wears.
Unſtudy'd Knowledge only was deſign'd,
The rich Attire of *Adam's* glorious Mind.
Thro' Nature's maze he knowledge could perſue;
And no dark Object could contract his View.
The Proſpect lengthen'd, as the Mind advanc'd,
While all before in beauteous Order danc'd.
Creation ſtoop'd, and ev'ry Creature came,
Diſplay'd its Nature, and receiv'd a Name.

Thus Knowledge firſt was without pains acquir'd:
Man knew enough, but yet to more aſpir'd;
To be more knowing, and more like his God:
Leaving the true, forbidden paths he trod,
But O, Abortive hopes! O fickle Joy!
His vain Ambition God did ſoon deſtroy;
For lo! A Cloud comes wing'd with ſudden night,
Man falls by Sin, and God withdraws his Light;
No more he finds the uſe of ſhining day;
But gropes for Knowledge, and miſtakes his way.
So Angels once a happy ſtate could boaſt:
O the bright Glories of that ſhining Hoſt!
But when th' Apoſtates fierce Rebellion dar'd:
Sin'd to be great, and with th' *Almighty* warr'd,
Vengeance Divine did ſoon the fact perſue:
And from *Elyſium* ſent the Godleſs Crew.

Our miſ'ry then from *Adam* firſt we date:
Begun too ſoon, and ending very late.
Life now does ſcarce one glimpſe of light diſplay;
We mourn in darkneſs, and Deſpair of day.
That *Nat'ral* light, once dreſs'd with *Orient* beams:
Diminiſh'd looks, and now a Twilight ſeems:
A Miſcellaneous Compoſition, made
Of Night, and Day, of Sun-ſhine, and of Shade.
Through an uncertain *Medium* now we look;
And find that Falſhood, which for Truth we took;

So

So Rays projected from the Eaſtern Skies,
Shew the falſe Day, before the true can riſe.

Unhappy Man who through ſucceſſive years
To Life's laſt Ebb, from early Childhood Errs!
No ſooner born, but proves a Foe to Truth:
For Infant Reaſon is o'er pow'd in Youth;
The Cheats of ſenſe will half our Learning ſhare:
And Preconceptions all our knowledge are.
Reaſon 'tis true, ſhould over ſenſe preſide,
Correct our Notions and our Judgments guide;
But falſe Opinions, rooted in the mind
Hood-wink the Soul, and keep the Reaſon blind;
Reaſon's a Taper, which but faintly burns:
A Languid Flame that glows and dies by turns:
We ſee't a while, and but a little way
We travel by its Light, as Men by Day;
But quickly dying, it forſakes us ſoon;
Like Morning Stars that never ſtay till Noon.

The Soul can ſcarce above the body riſe,
And all we ſee is with corporeal Eyes.
That little knowledge now which Man obtains,
From outward Objects, and from Senſe, he gleans.
He, like the painful Bee, muſt plod and ſweat:
By day muſt toil, by night that toil repeat;
And yet at laſt, what little Fruit he gains?
A Beggar's Harveſt, glean'd with mighty pains.

The Paſſions ſtill predominant will rule :
Uncivil, rude, nor bred in Reaſon's School :
Our Underſtanding they with darkneſs fill,
Cauſe ſtrange Conceptions, and pervert the Will.
On theſe the Soul, as on ſome flowing tide,
Muſt ſit, and on the ſwelling Billows ride ;
Hurry'd away, for how can be withſtood
Th' Impetuous Torrent of the boyling blood ?
Be gone falſe hopes, for all our Learning's vain,
Can we be free when theſe the rule maintain ?
Theſe are the tools of Knowledge which we uſe,
The ſpirits heated will ſtrange things produce.
Tell me who e'er the Paſſions could controul,
Or from the body diſengage the ſoul :
Till this is done, our beſt perſuits are vain
To conquer Truth, and unmixt knowledge gain.

Cuſtom the World's great Idol we adore ;
And knowing this, we ſeek to know no more.
What Education did at firſt receive
Maturer Age confirms us to believe.
The careful Nurſe, and Prieſt is all we need
To learn Opinions, and our Country's Creed ;
The Parents precepts early are inſtill'd
And ſpoil the Man, while they inſtruct the Child.
To what hard Fate is Human-kind betray'd ?
When thus Implicit Faith's a Vertue made ;

When Education more than Truth prevails
And nought is current but what Cuſtom ſeals.
Thus from the time we firſt begin to know
We live and learn, but not the wiſer grow;
We ſeldom uſe our liberty aright,
Nor Judge of things by Univerſal Light:
Our prepoſſeſſions and Affections bind
The Soul in Chains and lord it o'er the Mind.
And if ſelf Int'reſt be but in the caſe
Our unexamin'd Principles may paſs.
Good God! that man ſhould thus himſelf deceive,
To learn on Credit, and on Truſt believe:
Better the Mind no Notions had retain'd,
But ſtill a fair unwritten blank remain'd.
For now who Truth from Falſhood would diſcern
Muſt firſt diſrobe the Mind, and all unlearn:
Errors, contracted in unmindful Youth,
When once remov'd, will ſmooth the way for Truth:
To diſpoſſeſs the *Child* the Mortal lives,
But Death approaches e'er the *Man* arrives.
Thoſe who would Learning's glorious Kingdom find,
The dear bought purchaſe of the trading Mind:
From many dangers muſt themſelves acquit,
And more than *Scylla* and *Charybdis* meet.
O what an Ocean muſt be Voyag'd o'er!
To gain a proſpect of the ſhining ſhore:

Reſiſting Rocks oppoſe the bounding Soul,
And adverſe Waves retard it as they roll.
Does not that fooliſh deference we pay
To Men that liv'd long ſince, our paſſage ſtay?
O what prepoſt'rous paths at firſt we tread!
And learn to walk by ſtumbling on the Dead.
Firſt we a bleſſing from the Grave implore,
Worſhip Old Urns, and Monuments adore:
The Rev'rend Sage with vaſt eſteem we prize;
He liv'd long ſince, and muſt be wond'rous wiſe.
Thus are we Debtors to the famous Dead
For all thoſe Errors which their Phancies bred,
Errors indeed! for real Knowledge ſtay'd
With thoſe firſt times, nor farther was convey'd;
But light Opinions are much lower brought;
While on the Waves of Ignorance they float:
But ſolid Truth ſcarce ever gains the ſhore
So ſoon it ſinks, and ne'r emerges more.

And now ſuppoſe this maze of dangers paſt:
Will Knowledge dawn, and bleſs the Mind at laſt
Ah! no, 'tis now environ'd from our Eyes,
Hides all its Charms, and undiſcover'd lies.
Truth like a point or line eſcapes the ſight
And claims Intention to perceive it right:
But what reſembles Truth is ſoon deſcry'd,
Spread like a ſurface, and expanded wide:

The firſt Man rarely, very rarely finds:
The tedious ſearch of long inquiring Minds.
But yet what's worſe, we know not when we err;
What mark does Truth, what bright diſtinction bear?
How do we know, that what we know is true?
How ſhall we falſehood fly, and truth perſue?
Let none then here his certain knowledge boaſt,
'Tis all but probability at moſt:
This is the eaſie purchaſe of the Mind,
The Vulgar's Treaſure, which we ſoon may find:
But Truth lies hid, and e'er we can explore
The glitt'ring Gem, our fleeting Life is o'er.

Through all the bulky Volumes of the Dead,
And through thoſe Books which modern times have bred
The Soul may travel, as thro Mooriſh ground:
Where ſcarce one Uſeful Plant is ever found:
O'er-run with Errors, which ſo thick appear,
That ſearching Truth, we cannot find it there:

Bleſs'd *Revelation* but for thee we might
Have travel'd thro' a dark and tedious night;
Thy wond'rous force hath reach'd th' Impriſon'd Mind,
And loos'd thoſe Fetters, which her pow'rs did bind;
Now, now ſhe's free, and can with Eaſe run o'er
Thoſe obvious Truths ſo much perplex'd before

Reaſon

Reaſon has little now to do but prove
That ſome moſt perfect Being rules above,
And this by little Inference we find:
'Tis plain, 'tis bright, 'tis written on the Mind.
If there's a God, it then muſt be believ'd
He's no Deceiver, nor can be deceiv'd;
And if he ſpake, as may be plainly prov'd;
Then truth prevails, and every doubt's remov'd.
Here then at laſt my weary'd Soul ſhall reſt:
With Heav'nly light, and ſacred knowledge bleſt.
And now methinks bright Angels round me ſtand,
And bid me welcome to a peaceful Land.
Methinks I'm lifted to an higher Sphere
Where all is mild, and all the Proſpect clear:
From hence I can behold contending Schools,
Diſputing Sects, Philoſophers, and Fools;
Now I can each Hypotheſis deſpiſe,
Laugh at Opinions, and be boldly wiſe:
No more, Ye *Dogmatiſts*, your Wit ſhall harm
My liſ'ning Soul, no more my Reaſon charm;
No more you ſhall my Faculties controul:
Suſpicion guards, and Doubt defends my Soul,

FINIS.